

Foreword

Discovering / Uncovering the Modernity of Prehistory

Elke Seibert

*Drawings of the caves, caves, caves, caves.
There, and only there, is movement achieved.
Look at why, find the possibilities there, but doubt.*

Alberto Giacometti

After the European avant-garde discovered non-Western sculptures and objects in the 1910s and 1920s, they were legitimized as autonomous works of art and the market for “primitive” art increased. During the interwar period, these developments extended to the reception of prehistoric artifacts. It has already been over a decade since Julia Kelly underscored the significance of prehistoric objects during this time in her foundational monograph of 2007 entitled “Art, Ethnology and the Life of Objects. Paris c. 1925-35.” Her lucid analysis builds upon the pathbreaking and definitive studies on orientalism, primitivism, and exoticism by Edward Said (1978), William Rubin (1984), James Clifford (1988), and Thomas McEvilley (1992), which initiated a paradigm shift in scholarship that until then had been bound to the precedent set by Robert Goldwater (1938).

The term *la préhistoire* is inherent to the French language. However, German academic terminology offers only partial equivalents in designations such as *Vorgeschichte* (prehistory), *Frühgeschichte* (early or protohistory), *Urzeit* (primeval times), *Vorzeit* (prehistoric times), *Vorwelt* (prehistoric world), and *Archaik* (archaic). Transmission of the French meaning is difficult. Nevertheless, in his essay in the present volume, Professor Rémi Labrusse attempts to do so in his analysis of which forms of representation in the fine arts constituted the conception of a prehistory. The idea of a *Prähistorie* (prehistory) seems to offer a worthy approximation. In archaeology during the 18th and 19th centuries, prehistory encompassed the period between biblical creation and the first surviving written records. Whereas the academic disciplines of early history, archaeology, and European art history were independent of one another in German-speaking countries at the beginning of the 20th century, in France they had never been separated, and early discoveries of prehistoric artifacts and significant cave paintings naturally led to a unified study of archaic and contemporary art. These distinct traditions continue to have an influence upon

interdisciplinary German-French projects and upon transnational contextualization.

Research questions that arose from my German Research Foundation (DFG) project “Travel in Time and Space – Prehistoric Rock Painting and the Genesis of Contemporary Art in New York and Paris (1935-1960)” led to a dialogue with German and French scholars. Having conducted extensive preparatory research at American archives and research institutions (2012-15), I deepened my knowledge of the field upon my return to the artistic metropolis of the 20th century, where I was a post-doctoral research fellow at the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte (DFK Paris) in 2016-18. My aim of presenting lesser-known scholarship by German-speaking academics in Paris was realized at a workshop entitled “Prähistorie und Modernität” (Prehistory and Modernity) in April 2017, which the DFK Paris (Max-Weber-Stiftung) generously financed. Theoretical approaches to the ways prehistory was imagined from the 19th to the 21st century had already been introduced in seminars by Labrusse (University of Paris-Nanterre), publications, and conferences at French universities, as well as the preparations for the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2019. To that end, I wanted to focus on those aspects of archaic art that were perceived as modern and surreal between 1920 and 1950, and on the artists and objects of the avant-garde, surrealism, and early abstraction.

Over the course of two days, we discussed fundamental questions. What is abstraction? Which specific qualities of prehistoric artifacts led to the resolution of artistic problems within modernism? What distinguishes prehistoric art from other forms of *l’art premier*? Which artists remarked upon the art of prehistoric times? The cave as a type of space was compelling to artists. Did prehistoric art motivate artists to experiment with surface and space, light, and shade? Questions inherent to the works were central. Prehistoric artists attempted to introduce dynamism and movement to their compositions. Who drew inspiration from it and which of their works visualize movement? At present, the most incisive example of cinematographic representation in prehistoric art are the lion paintings at the Chauvet Cave, which are contextualized by both Prof. Harald Floss and Dr Maria Gonzalez in the present volume.

Prehistoric engravings, petroglyphs, and pictograms on rocks and other exposed sites are tied to their surroundings and establish perspectival constellations of viewers. Did these artistic concepts provide an impetus for the dissolution of traditional paradigms of space? This hypothesis is highly relevant to Alberto Giacometti’s mature work. In our essays, Prof. Thierry Dufrêne and I develop a surprising, critical approach to his art from this period (fig. 2).

It is also productive to consider the historical context in which these discoveries were made. In the Western world from 1920 to 1945, the dialogue, reception, and citation of prehistoric artifacts and petroglyphs were dominated by the cave paintings at Altamira (and the fact that they had been authenticated): the discovery of the cave at Lascaux in 1940 was not made public until after the Second World War. Thus, until 1945, the designation “Sistine Chapel of Prehistoric Times” belonged to the cave at Altamira. These highly sophisticated, magical representations of

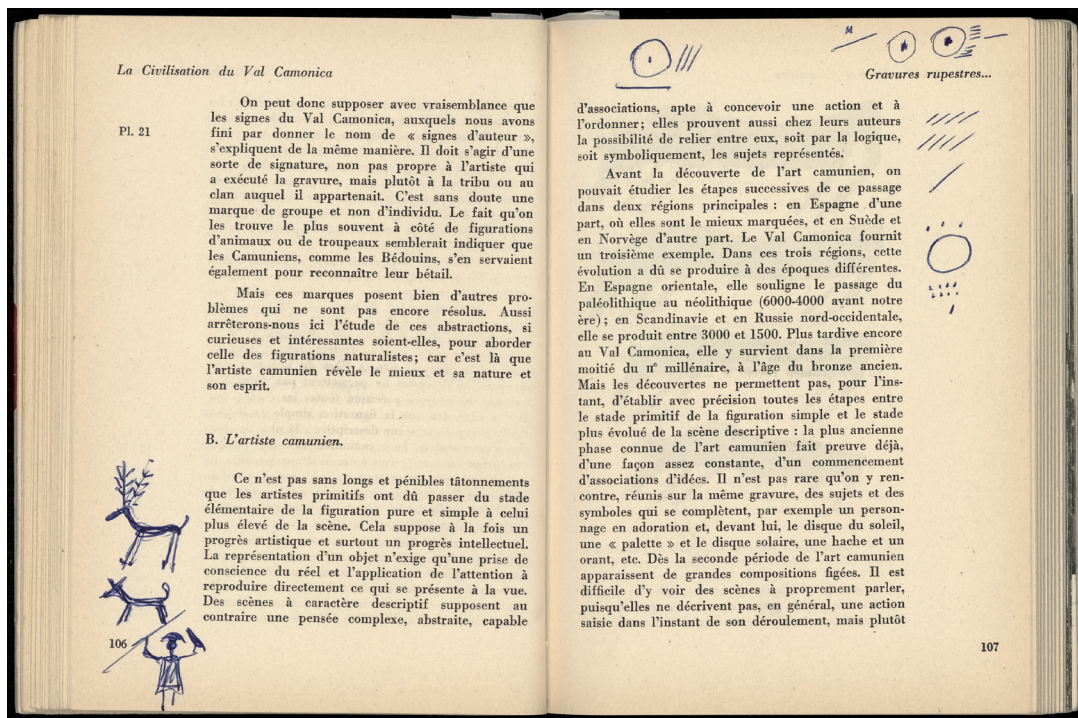
bison and horses circulated in the form of photographs and reproductions in journals and illustrated books with wide readerships in Europe and North America. As Floss impressively relays, the Aurignacian artists of the Ice Age were not inhibited by today's borders, but rather created astounding works in locations such as the Swabian Alps in southern Germany. In the 1930s, the frequency of publications on new discoveries in Europe and Africa increased, in direct parallel to the works of contemporary artists. Painters set out to see the originals in Spain, France, southern Germany, and northern Italy. However, they often (and with delight) kept secret their real and imaginary journeys in natural history and to anthropological collections and art museums, in order to maintain the impression of their own ingenuity. In the rich, thoroughly researched essays in this volume on the oeuvres of Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Willi Baumeister, and Joan Miró, the question of the discovery and concealment of the modernity of prehistoric artifacts has reached its pinnacle.

The process of looking back to the prehistoric era during the interwar period, and to humanity's dependence on nature and the beginnings of art, is comparable with the longings and projections that characterized the first half of the 20th century. Indeed, it is an understandable reaction to the frightening technological developments and the threat of annihilation by other members of one's own species. At the same time, since the onset of postmodernism, artistic questions pertaining to identity are of great significance. In principle, the roughly contemporaneous movements of conceptual art, minimalism, shamanism, and land art all took the underlying structure of the prehistoric *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a precedent. In the 20th century, people bid farewell to the idea that the development of art was linear. As we the audience can remark with pride, our debates have unconsciously influenced the realization of the exhibition "Préhistoire. Une énigme moderne" (May–September 2019). I would like to thank the curator Rémi Labrusse as well as the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti in Paris for referencing my original hypothesis, namely that Alberto Giacometti had visited Val Camonica and was familiar with the prehistoric rock engravings there. The exhibition featured Emmanuel Anati's book "La Civilisation du Val Camonica" (Paris: Arthaud, 1960) from Giacometti's private library without commentary. In his copy, the artist drew symbols and depictions of animals in the style of Val Camonica's prehistoric rock engravings (see fig 1).

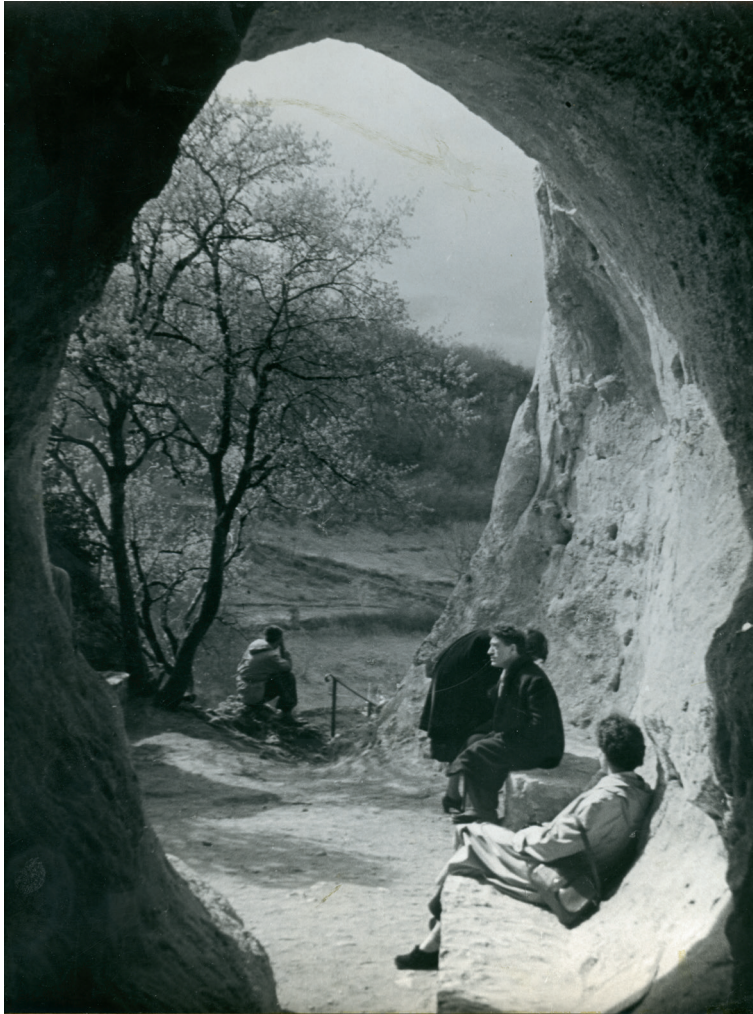
The illuminating essays in this volume synthesize the conference presentations. It fills me with great satisfaction and appreciation to see the vital and innovative results of long-term research distilled and summarized in this volume. It offers the reader a compact overview, if not an overarching introduction, to the topic. I sincerely thank Rémi Labrusse, Harald Floss, Maria Gonzalez Menendez, and Thierry Dufrêne for their time and commitment to this project, as well as for their highly readable, spirited essays. Dr Markus A. Castor and Dr Julia Drost, who have extensive experience orchestrating successful events at the DFK, provided me with great support during the two-day conference, for which I am most grateful. My dear colleagues Dr Agathe Cabau and Dr Markus A. Castor, Paris, were perceptive and thoughtful

co-editors. The high-quality images were generously provided by the Kunsthau Zurich, the Fondation Alberto and Annette Giacometti Paris, the Willi Baumeister Stiftung, a private collection, Domingo Milella, and Harald Floss.

It is entirely thanks to the initiative of Prof Thomas Kirchner, that our discussions and scholarly work are now accessible to an international audience. On behalf of all the authors and co-editors, I would like to offer him and the DFK Paris our wholehearted thanks. Without their spontaneous willingness to print this volume in the series Passerelles Online, it would not have been possible to publish this conference publication. With the term having been coined in the late nineteenth century, a burgeoning intellectual and creative global discourse of Prehistory had developed by the early twentieth century. From avant-garde painters to surrealist sculptors, from Pablo Picasso to Alberto Giacometti, Prehistory held a hallowed place in the modernist imagination.



1 Alberto Giacometti, Drawings in blue pencil on pages of the book by Emmanuel Anati, *La Civilisation du Val Camonica*, Arthaud: Paris, 1960



2 Théodore Fraenkel, *Alberto and Annette Giacometti at the entrance of the Fond des Gaumes cave* (near the Lascaux caves, in the 1950s, with Fraenkel et Marianne Strauss in Dordogne), Les Eyzies, France, 1950